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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Investing in America

By BOB HERBERT

On a quiet Wednesday morning last August, Senators Chris Dodd and Chuck Hagel held a news conference in Washington to discuss what they felt was a critical issue: the nation's deteriorating infrastructure.

The press was not impressed. Only a handful of reporters showed up to listen to their contention that a real crisis was at hand. That evening, during rush hour, the Interstate 35W bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis collapsed, plunging vehicles 60 feet into the river and killing 13 people.

There is usually not much about infrastructure stories to turn readers or viewers on. But the catastrophe in New Orleans and the bridge collapse in Minneapolis are tragic evidence of the peril that goes hand in hand with neglect of the nation's roads, bridges, levees, transit systems, water treatment facilities and so on.

Just two weeks before the Minneapolis bridge collapse, an underground steam pipe in Midtown Manhattan exploded, sending a geyser of filth and asbestos-laden debris into the air. A woman fleeing the scene died of a heart attack, and the area suffered millions of dollars in economic damage.

In South Carolina, where candidates of both parties competed in recent presidential primaries, there is a long stretch of grievously neglected rural schools that has been dubbed "the corridor of shame." Some of the schools are more than a century old. Among the many problems are ancient plumbing, inadequate heating and sewage that backs up into classrooms, bringing in vermin and terrible odors.

The country could do itself a favor by paying more attention to the efforts of Senator Dodd, a Connecticut Democrat who is chairman of the Banking Committee, and Senator Hagel, a Nebraska Republican. They have co-sponsored legislation that would create a national infrastructure bank to promote and help finance large-scale projects across the nation.

Part of their mission is to generate a sense of urgency. In an interview yesterday, Senator Dodd told me: “At a time when we’re worried about rising unemployment rates and declining confidence in this country, infrastructure projects have the dual effect of putting people to work — and usually at pretty good salaries and wages — while also creating a sense of optimism, of investing in the future.”

The country has been hit hard by lost jobs in manufacturing and construction. As government and political leaders are scrambling for ways to stimulate the economy in the current downturn, infrastructure improvements would seem to be a natural component of any effective recovery plan.

“In terms of stimulating the economy, there is nothing better than a job,” said Senator Dodd.

The need for investment on a large scale — and for the long term — is undeniable. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, in a study that should have gotten much more attention when it was released in 2005, it would take more than a trillion and a half dollars over a five-year period to bring the U.S. infrastructure into reasonably decent shape.

Will we wait until another New Orleans-style disaster occurs, or another heavily traveled bridge plunges into a river?

As things stand now, the American infrastructure is incapable of meeting the competitive demands of the globalized 21st-century economy. Senator Hagel noted that ports are overwhelmed by the ever-expanding volume of international trade. Rail lines are overloaded. Highways are clogged.

“The basic infrastructure of a country will determine that country’s future,” he said, “and we are far behind.”

We appear to have forgotten the lessons of history. Time and again an economic boom has followed periods of sustained infrastructure improvement. It's impossible to calculate all of the benefits from (to mention just a few) the Erie Canal, which connected the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean and helped make New York America's premier city; the rural electrification program and other capital improvements of the New Deal; the interstate highway program of the Eisenhower administration.

The tremendous costs and vast reach of today's infrastructure requirements means that the federal government has to take a leadership role. It's inevitable. The only question is when.

The financier Felix Rohatyn, who served as ambassador to France during the Clinton administration, and former Senator Warren Rudman, a Republican, have been sounding the alarm for a number of years now, urging the government to get over its unwillingness to invest adequately in public transportation systems, water projects, schools, dams, the electric grid, and so on.

I remember Mr. Rohatyn telling me, "A modern economy needs a modern platform, and that's the infrastructure."

The current concern over the economy should be taken by the government as a signal to finally move ahead on this critically important issue.

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